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## California Medicine



## EDITORIAL

### Oversell and Undersell

THESE ARE TIMES of much ado about continuing education for physicians. There is an uncomfortable feeling abroad that progress in medical science is pulling way ahead of the practicing physician's ability to keep pace with it, and that this gap may impair the quality of patient care. The public's apprehension that this may be true is fed in many ways. For example, news media frequently give dramatic national, even worldwide coverage to items which are being reported for the first time at some scientific meeting and which have yet to be subjected to critical scrutiny or even confirmed. On the academic side, deans of medical schools and professors, who often practice little if at all, make authoritative statements to the effect that the half-life of a medical school education may now be only five or ten years at best because of the great progress which has been made in the laboratories of modern science.

The public understandably assumes that information emanating from respected scientific sources such as these is factual and complete and begins to wonder what must be the state of learning of a physician who has been out of medical school and in practice for 10, 20 or even 30 years. For these, and no doubt other reasons as well, the public is becoming concerned; and the feeling in many quarters is that something more should be done to ensure the continuing competence of practicing physicians.

All of this seems to suggest that there may have been somewhat of an oversell of institutional scientific progress and a corresponding undersell of the continuing medical education which in fact goes on in day to day practice. For example, little is made of the important fact that individual physicians learn from their contact with patients and from first hand experience with cases of disease, injury or emotional upset. This is a continuing education process of profound importance which while it begins in medical school carries on throughout a lifetime of practice. It gives rise not only to an important and cumulative body of professional knowledge, but also to things called wisdom and judgment, and to a curious capacity to make reasonably sound decisions on the basis of less than adequate data when time is an important factor or when the scientific information is simply not available. This experiential educational process